

5-1-2009

The Sky is Wide Enough: A Historico-Critical Appraisal of Theological Activity and Method in Africa

Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator
Marquette University, agbonkhianmeghe.orobator@marquette.edu

The Sky is Wide Enough: A Historico-Critical Appraisal of Theological Activity and Method in Africa

Agbonkhanmeghe E. Orobator, SJ*

Abstract: This essay presents and critiques the methods and claims of the principal theological schools and camps of African theology. While situating them in their historical context, it examines their respective claims as the best representative or expression of theological activity in Africa. The historico-critical appraisal of these African theological schools generates some useful lessons on the nature and method of theological reflection in Africa, particularly the necessity of taking experience and context seriously.

Introduction: The development and scope of theological reflection in Africa constitute a rich domain of systematic inquiry. The essay highlights some key moments, aspects, figures and modes of theological reflection in Africa. As even the most cursory survey of the literature would reveal, this domain is complex and, at times, outright confusing. The issues covered in this essay have been deliberately circumscribed to avoid simply (re)tracing the entire historical trajectory of African theology. This essay's modest objective of a critical appraisal also includes an analysis of methodological preferences as these relate to theological activity in Africa. For the purposes of situating the objective of this essay, the following general remarks are in order.

First, in the perspectives of its pioneers, African theology takes on a character of provisionality. An awareness of its gradual but promising progression permeated the deliberations of African theologians who assembled at the inaugural Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians in 1977. Understandably, they perceived themselves as architects of a new theology *en route*.¹ Several decades after that seminal gathering in Accra, Ghana, the realisation persists that African theology has yet to attain an organic unity or produce a comprehensive synthesis. Congolese theologian A. Ngindu Mushete describes African theological reflection as a dynamic activity "*en marche . . . en pleine développement*."² His compatriot Kä Mana confirms this observation and underlines its evolutionary character: African theology is "*en pleine mutation*."³ As a consequence of this growth process, a significant portion of theological activity in post-independent Africa was focused largely on defining its "agenda," formulating "guidelines" and

¹ Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres, eds., *African Theology en route* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1979); see "Final Communiqué: Pan-African Conference of Third World Theologians, December 17-23, 1977, Accra, Ghana," 189-195.

² A. Ngindu Mushete, *Les thèmes majeurs de la théologie africaine* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1989), 9.

³ Kä Mana, *Théologie africaine pour temps de crise: christianisme et reconstruction de l'Afrique* (Paris: Karthala, 1993), 10.

* **Agbonkhanmeghe E. Orobator** is a Jesuit priest from Nigeria. He teaches Fundamental Theology and Ecclesiology at Hekima College. He is the Rector of the Hekima College Jesuit Community.

constructing road maps to avoid “pitfalls.”⁴ As Bénézet Bujo contends, “There is a great deal of talk about African theology, but so far it has hardly gone beyond preliminary clearing of the ground.”⁵

Second, notwithstanding the provisional character of African theological reflection, a simplified account would hardly do justice to a field of inquiry that has been immensely variegated. At different levels of analysis, the term “African theology” possesses wide-ranging applications. It describes a variety of literary, symbolic, oral, and intellectual productions and re-productions, claims and counterclaims; some of these are original, while others are mimetic. The perspectives of African theologians seem far removed from one another in many ways when it comes to the definition, divisions, tendencies, categories and methods of their subject matter. Again, we must recall here the provisional character of African theology alluded to above. Nothing, it seems, has been definitively cast in stone. Consequently, in exploring African theological literature, one discovers that each theologian or writer seems to enjoy the liberty of producing his or her own definitions, divisions, tendencies, categories and methods.⁶

Third, besides the fact that the level of theological activity in Africa still seems a fraction of what it needs to be, it does not appear to enjoy widespread critical appreciation. For instance, in his highly acclaimed single-volume work on twentieth-century theology, theologians and major theological currents, David Ford does not profile any African theologian.⁷ There is, perhaps, a wider point at issue here, namely, the possibility that the history of mainstream theology continues to be perceived as something epitomised largely in the works of Western theologians. Whether this amounts to a minor and, therefore, excusable omission or a telling indictment of the level of theological development in Africa, remains an open question. Either way, it would seem to echo the judgement made more than three decades ago by Aylward Shorter, that African theology en route embodies a respectable potential, but it is far from being a fully matured branch of the tree of universal theology: its “contribution cannot, by any stretch of the imagination, be said to have been made yet.”⁸ How much, how far have things changed?

⁴ See Bongajalo Goba, *An Agenda for Black Theology: Hermeneutics for Social Change* (Johannesburg: Skotaville Publishers, 1988); Osadolor Imasogie, *Guidelines for Christian Theology in Africa* (Achimota, Ghana: Africa Christian Press, 1983); Byang H. Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa* (Kisumu, Kenya: Evangel Publishing House, 1975); Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, “Half a Century of African Christian Theology: Elements of the Emerging Agenda for the 21st Century,” in J. N. K. Mugambi, ed., *The Church and the Reconstruction of Africa: Theological Considerations* (Nairobi, Kenya: AACC, 1997), 84-114.

⁵ Bénézet Bujo, *African Theology in its Social Context* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1992), 73.

⁶ For example, some theologians outline an assortment of theological schools, orientations, sources, brands and tendencies in African theology. See Desmond M. Tutu, “Black Theology and African Theology – Soulmates or Antagonists?” in John Parratt, ed., *A Reader in African Christian Theology* (London: SPCK, 1997), 36-44; “Whither African Theology?” in Edward Fasholé-Luke, Richard Gray, et al., eds., *Christianity in Independent Africa* (London: Rex Collins, 1978), 364-369; T. Tshibangu, *La théologie africaine* (Kinshasa, DRC: Editions Saint Paul Afrique. n.d.), 37 ff; Mushete, *Les thèmes majeurs de la théologie africaine*, 32 ff; “An Overview of African Theology,” in Gibellini, *Paths of African Theology*, 16-24; Maluleke, “Half a Century of African Christian Theology,” 101 ff; John Parratt, “Conclusion: Current Issues in African Theology,” in Parratt, *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, 142-144; Kwame Bediako, “African Theology,” in David F. Ford, ed., *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1997), 426-444; John W. de Gruchy, “African Theology: South Africa,” in Ford, *The Modern Theologians*, 446-450.

⁷ *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1997).

⁸ Aylward Shorter, *African Christian Theology—Adaptation or Incarnation* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1975), 33; cf. 36.

If the foregoing sounds disappointing, the intent is wholly other. South African ecclesiastic and theologian Desmond Tutu has made a point around which the opinions of many theologians in Africa converge:

There must then be a plurality of theologies, because we do not all apprehend or respond to the transcendent in exactly the same way, nor can we be expected to express our experience in the same way. And this is no cause for lament. Precisely the opposite – it is a reason for rejoicing because it makes mandatory our need for one another because our partial theologies will of necessity require to be corrected by other more or less partial theologies.⁹

Taken along with the point already made about the provisional nature of theological reflection in Africa, and the view that its contribution has not yet been made, Tutu's advice proffers hope and inspires optimism – much of the task of theological reflection in Africa lies ahead, not in a misty irrecoverable past.

Against the background of this rhetoric of partial, limited, contextualised and plural theologies, the fact remains that some proponents of African theology have not always shown sufficient mutual appreciation. In sub-Saharan Africa, before speaking of *African* theology one needs to establish a set of preliminary qualifications to indicate the geographical area to which the term applies, for, historically, the southern end of the subcontinent has followed a theological "tradition" that is far removed from "the rest." As Tutu contends, this ought to be "a reason for rejoicing." At times, however, when one surveys African theological literature, one cannot but observe that the much vaunted necessity of a plurality of theologies to serve the varied needs of the continent dissimulates a multitude of uneasy relationships and disagreements and, thus, appears more like a *modus vivendi* designed simply to allow African theologians to "get on with the work of theologizing."¹⁰ What, then, are the major trends in African theology?

Two Birds: African Theology and Black Theology

Historically, African theology has been interpreted largely under two major categories: "Black Theology" in South Africa and "African Theology" in the rest of sub-Saharan Africa. Much has been written to demonstrate the complementarity of their purposes and goals.¹¹ Questions regarding the compatibility of their respective purposes, methods and claims continue to provide materials for lively debates and dialogues. Over the years proponents of each school, as well as their observers, have raised questions regarding the relationship between them: "Siblings or distant cousins?," "Soul mates or antagonists?," "Relatives or estranged parents?" In principle these questions should not be of any practical relevance, because, as African theologians have always maintained, a plurality of theologies results from unique ways of experiencing reality and conceiving of the transcendent. This in turn implies complementarity of purposes rather than competition between the divergent foci of the two approaches. In reality, however, as noted above, at different moments and to varying degrees, serious controversies have

⁹ Tutu, "Whither African Theology?," 367-368.

¹⁰ John Mbiti, "The Biblical Basis for Present Trends in African Theology," in Appiah-Kubi and Torres, *African Theology en route*, 91.

¹¹ See especially, Emmanuel Martey, *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993); Stephen I. Munga, *Beyond the Controversy: A Study of African Theologies of Inculturation and Liberation* (Lund, Sweden: Lund University Press, 1998).

often distorted their relationship, a fact which stems primarily from insufficient mutual knowledge.

According to an African proverb, “the sky is wide enough for two birds to fly without their wings touching.” Plurality does not necessarily mean controversy. Controversy does not necessarily result in isolation, either. It needs to be made clear that, contrary to the opinion of some theologians, African theology and Black theology have not always flown in isolation of each other. Their “wings” have touched on many occasions and continue to touch on several platforms. South African theologian Tinyiko Sam Maluleke’s statement that African theological reflections “are carried out in isolated ‘camps’” appears to oversimplify the facts, even though it contains certain elements of reality.¹² Firm evidence exists which would relativize his categorical assertion, precisely in the form of theological congresses, consultations, conferences and symposia which continue to be important dimensions of theological activity in Africa. African theologians have met, even though their languages have not always been mutually comprehensible, because of linguistic rather than ideological or doctrinal barriers. For example, French-speaking African theologians sometimes lack the requisite bilingual capacity to penetrate the works of English-speaking African theologians, and vice versa.

Each of the two main divisions of African theology claims its own cast of precursors, founders, date of origin, method and subject matter. On the evidence of some theologians, the broad division known as African Theology owes its origin to an assortment of personalities, places and events. More precisely, as the story goes, this type of African theology assumed its incipient identity on the platform of a widely-publicised and lively debate in 1960 within the halls of the distinguished *Facultés Catholiques de Kinshasa* (DRC). The terms of that debate appeared as two simple but mutually exclusive possibilities: African theology – to be or not to be? For those, like Congolese ecclesiastic, Tarcisse Tshibangu, then a student at *Facultés Catholiques*, who argued in the affirmative, the possibility existed of having “une théologie de couleur africaine.”¹³ The premise of the protagonists of theology with an “African colour” appeared as simple as the initial disjunctive proposition: If God’s revelation in Jesus Christ is manifested in the concrete and historical realities of human existence, then the concomitant human word (or logos) “in relation to what God [*theos*] has done, is doing and will do . . .” should not be averse to bearing the cultural and social marks of the Christian community as a whole to which the theologian belongs.¹⁴

Although, in its initial outline, this approach resembled “a theology of adaptation” and would, in due course, be rejected in favour of a more politically correct nomenclature, such as “theology of incarnation,” “incarnational theology” and “theology of inculturation,” the central claims of this branch of African theology remains practically unchanged. One of its key claims is that African religious traditions and cultural heritages are vessels of divine revelation, representing “stepping stones” or constituting “propaedeutical phases” in view of a fuller revelation. There are questions regarding whether these vessels are adequate or inferior to Western (missionary) modes of trans-

¹² Maluleke, “Half a Century of African Christian Theology,” 86.

¹³ Tshibangu, *La théologie africaine*, 56; Mushete, *Les thèmes majeurs de la théologie africaine*, 42-47. Tshibangu also notes that the “public legitimation” of African theology as a valid discipline within Roman Catholic theology came by way of the public use of the term “African theology” by Pope John Paul II, in April 9, 1985. See Tshibangu, *La théologie Africaine*, 3.

¹⁴ Tutu, “Whither African Theology?,” 367.

mitting the message. Nonetheless, as a valid and critical activity, the core function and critical focus of African theology concern how to make sense of many centuries of an ambiguous encounter between the content of divine revelation and the absolute claims of Christianity, on the one hand, and the ineluctable realities of African religious heritage, on the other. In this kind of context, the task devolves on the African theologian to reflect critically on the conditions and modalities which can facilitate a fruitful dialogue between the two religious traditions: the one Christian, the other African. This process of inculturation constitutes the domain of African theology.

Proponents of Black (African liberation) theology also have their own terra natalis, precursors and ancestors. It began in the turbulent era of apartheid in South Africa, precisely in the 1960's. While its initial development owed much to the pioneering work of North American theologian James H. Cone, it also drew freely upon the methodological resources of the then-nascent Latin American theology of liberation. Black theology, according to its principal protagonists, represented "a new way of doing theology," which prioritised "doing" (praxis) over "reading."¹⁵ Like its African "soul mate," Black theology embodied a complex field of study. John de Gruchy, for instance, identifies five types of African (Black) theology "born in the struggle against apartheid": "confessing, black, liberation, womanist/feminist, and prophetic or kairos theologies."¹⁶

From the perspective of methodology, Black theology takes seriously the situation of oppression, marginalisation and structural injustice, which, at the time of the apartheid regime in South Africa, was the lot of the black population. In this kind of context, Black theology critically examines the meaning and significance of faith, belief, salvation, scripture, Jesus Christ, God, etc.¹⁷ Furthermore, it analyses the socio-political context of its own existence as a scientific discipline, using socio-analytical and biblical tools; it identifies obstacles which impede the manifestations of the Reign of God; and it outlines the action(s) required to transform the status quo into a society that is an inclusive, integrated and just embodiment of God's plan for Creation.¹⁸

As mentioned above, historically, the relationship between these two modes of theological reflection in Africa harboured some needless tension and mutual suspicion. The labels that each camp used to describe the other were not entirely flattering. Proponents of Black theology used to describe African theology as an "ethnic" or "cultural" theology. As Tutu and others repeatedly stressed, African (cultural) theology "tended to be more placid," "failed to produce a sufficiently sharp cutting edge," and "will have to recover its prophetic calling."¹⁹ One of the reasons why Black theologians excoriated African theology was the latter's narrow conception of its principal thesis – as Shorter formulated it and Kwame Bediako has recently restated it – that "African Christian The-

¹⁵ John W. de Gruchy, "The Nature, Necessity and Task of Theology," in John W. de Gruchy and Charles Villa-Vicencio, eds., *Doing Theology in Context: South African Perspectives* (Maryknoll, New York/Cape Town and Johannesburg: Orbis Books/David Philip, 1994), 2-3; "African Theology: South Africa," in Ford, *The Modern Theologians*, 445-446.

¹⁶ Ibid, 447.

¹⁷ Barney Pitjana, "Black Theology," in de Gruchy and Villa-Vicencio, *Doing Theology in Context*, 173-174; Goba, *An Agenda for Black Theology*, 69-70.

¹⁸ See, as an example of this method, the seminal document of Black theology: "The Kairos Document: Challenge to the Church A Theological Comment on the Political Crisis in South Africa," in Robert McAfee Brown, ed., *Kairos: Three Prophetic Challenges to the Church* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1990); Albert Nolan, "Kairos Theology," in de Gruchy and Villa-Vicencio, *Doing Theology in Context*, 212-218.

¹⁹ Tutu, "Black Theology and African Theology," 43; "Whither African Theology?," 369.

ology must grow [solely] out of a dialogue between Christianity and the theologies of African traditional religion."²⁰

For their part, African theologians expressed profound reservations about the authenticity of Black theology, which they perceived as "political theology" or "secular theology." According to John Mbiti, one of the most vociferous critics of Black theology, this latter could not claim to be authentically Christian as long as it "lacked full or clear biblical grounding" and/or commits too exclusively, too militantly to political liberation as the goal of theological activity.²¹ For Mbiti, "Black Theology cannot and will not become African Theology. . . . One would hope that theology arises out of spontaneous joy in being a Christian responding to life and ideas as one redeemed. Black Theology, however, is full of sorrow, bitterness, anger and hatred."²² One could raise the question: Given the dire context of apartheid, could we seriously have expected Black theology to be otherwise?

Thus, each theological camp has tended to undermine the other's claim to authenticity and its fidelity to the message of Christianity, while at the same time paying lip service to the necessity of theological plurality. Fortunately, that kind of polemical attitude has all but disappeared, although its traces linger in the theological speculations of Tanzanian theologian Charles Nyamiti.

A Third Force: Reconstruction Theology

The last couple of decades has witnessed the emergence of what claims to be a third major trend in African theological enterprise: Theology of Reconstruction. This relatively new approach is closely related to a circle of African theologians associated with the Nairobi-based All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC). Practically all the published works related to this theological approach have so far appeared under the auspices of AACC.²³ Since the exponents of the theology of reconstruction draw from a common ideological and methodological pool, I will outline the main thrust of their approach in a few broad strokes.

Theologians of reconstruction begin their reflection with the observation that two aspects of Africa's history have greatly influenced theology on the continent, namely, the quest for cultural emancipation and the struggle for political freedom. Consequently, theological reflection has tended to focus attention on the issue of identity, on the one hand, and that of freedom, on the other. But now, the argument continues, the era

²⁰ Shorter, *African Christian Theology*, 1; cf. Bediako, "African Theology," 437-439; see also, Gabriel M. Setiloane, *African Theology: An Introduction* (Johannesburg: Skotaville Publishers, 1986), 35, Tshibangu, *La théologie africaine*, 43,

²¹ Mbiti, "The Biblical Basis for Present Trends in African Theology," 90.

²² Quoted in Tutu, "Black Theology and African Theology," 38, 39.

²³ J. N. K. Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology After the Cold War* (Nairobi, Kenya: East Africa Educational Publishers Ltd., 1995); ed., *The Church and the Future of Africa: Problems and Promises* (Nairobi, Kenya: AACC, 1997); *The Church and the Reconstruction of Africa: Theological Considerations* (Nairobi, Kenya: AACC, 1997); Ngoy Daniel Mulunda-Nyanga, *The Reconstruction of Africa: Faith and Freedom for a Conflicted Continent* (Nairobi, Kenya: AACC, 1997); Kä Mana, *Théologie africaine pour temps de crise*. Charles Villa-Vicencio has been erroneously associated with this AACC group. Although one of his major works is entitled *Theology of Reconstruction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), Villa-Vicencio shares very little of the ideological underpinnings of this school of theological reflection.

of cultural and political liberation has ceased, and reconstruction has begun. J. N. K. Mugambi actually fixes the terminus ad quo of this brand of theology to coincide with the end of the Cold War, that is, around the late 1980s and early 1990s. Reconstruction theologians argue that the preoccupation with these two issues (cultural emancipation and political freedom) led to the emergence, first, of a cultural theology (African theology) and, secondly, a political or liberation theology (Black theology). As long as African theology and Black theology located the goals of their activity within the confines of cultural emancipation and political liberation, it was perfectly justified to adopt the biblical "Exodus motif," as the symbol of the movement towards the promised land, and the figure of Moses, as the facilitator of this historic and decisive event. Furthermore, the theologians of reconstruction argue that the cessation of the Cold War, the proclamation of the "New World Order" and the collapse of apartheid in South Africa, have combined to thrust reconstruction to the centre stage as the "*enjeu majeur*" or strategic goal of present and future orientations of African theology. Logically, in this scheme, the main biblical and theological motif becomes "Return from Exile" under the innovative and dynamic figure of Nehemiah, who also sounds the rallying cry: "Let's build!"

Attractive and logical as this argument for an African theology of reconstruction appears, some of its central assumptions remain largely either unconvincing or unproven. While Mugambi is more direct in his attempt to cajole more than half a century of theological reflection in Africa out of existence, Kä Mana is more circumspect in conjuring up its replacement. In outlining the claims of the theology of reconstruction, Kä Mana argues that reconstruction constitutes the linchpin that fits together and completes the dialectical quest for cultural identity and the political liberation of Africa. By so doing, he reveals a thinly disguised hubris that allows him to present this brand of theology as the crowning moment of the long march or the missing link in the historical evolution of African theology.

Basically, in order to justify the need for a new theology, the major proponents of reconstruction theology adjudge the preceding syntheses as having all but outlived their usefulness, even though they may still provide some form of foundation for the novel theological edifice. However, one could argue that, actually, what they successfully point up is the fact that theological reflection cannot dispense lightly with the goal of liberation, variously understood as cultural, ethical, economic, spiritual, political, etc. A good number of theologians would agree with the view that liberation (or integral salvation) ought to remain a permanent feature of theological discourse.²⁴ The idea of liberation would not be complete if it did not include the possibility of "making all things new" and fulfilling God's dream for all of Creation (See Luke 4:14-21; Isaiah 65:17; 66:22; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 21:1-7). However, the necessity or relevance of a whole new theology which stakes its claims on making this point, while refusing to be identified as an expression of liberation theology, remains to be seen.

When it comes to defining the "*éthique*" and "*pratique*" of managing Africa's crises and (re)constructing its future, Kä Mana and others provide only a selective and idealised account of how the Scripture "manages crises," in the hope that the force of this analytical exercise would unleash the totality of the Africans' creative capacities (*l'imaginaire*) and supply a renewed confidence to construct "utopias" (*l'utopie*). Decidedly, this is a fascinating but an unconvincing feat of theological innovation.

²⁴ Pityana, "Black Theology," 180; John W. de Gruchy, "Confessing Theology," in de Gruchy and Villa-Vicencio, *Doing Theology in Context*, 168-169.

Furthermore, the proponents of African theology of reconstruction operate a remarkable theological tour de force by declaring one theological era closed and another open.²⁵ Besides, their division and interpretation of history appear rather oversimplified. In this regard, Maluleke correctly observes that the supposed temporal catalyst for reconstruction, that is, the end of the Cold War (and even the end of apartheid!), did not significantly alter for good the prospects of Africa's position in the now-defunct "New World Order." As contemporary historical developments, like globalisation, market economy, multinational domination and global financial crisis have shown, Africa has been sucked deeper into the grip of external and internal captivity – it is business as usual!

In the final analysis, however, theologians of reconstruction can still claim their fair share of some space in "the sky" of theological reflection in Africa alongside other traditions.²⁶ The sky is wide enough!

We cannot repeat enough the idea that theological reflection originates not purely from the fertile imagination of the theologian but from within the community of believers. The familiar methodological mantra of Latin American liberation theologians that theological reflection constitutes a "second act" serves as a permanent corrective to any purely academic and subjective production of theology, no matter how ingenious.

Lessons on Method

What value do the foregoing considerations offer to the quest of demarcating the methodological contours of theological activity in Africa? Simply put, they allow us to rediscover and underline certain key aspects of theological reflection in Africa, as elsewhere.

First, based on what has been presented above, we are better able to appreciate the importance of repositioning theological reflection within the context of the community called church and the wider society.²⁷ Consequently, it becomes clear that it is not enough to theologize exclusively on the basis of the intellectual acumen of the theologian, while he or she comfortably ensconces himself or herself in the protected milieu of academia. "The work of theologizing" or, according to Tutu, the "exhilarating business" of theological reflection, must spring from the forthright observation and experience of the situation in life of the believing community wherein echoes the strong but gentle wind of the Spirit (See Genesis 1:1-2; John 3:8; Acts 2:1-2).

The second methodological implication concerns the preoccupation with creating neat categories. We need to move away from the practice of categorising African theology into manageable compartments. While this approach may contain some merits from a pedagogical point of view, the history of African theology has shown how it can easily degenerate into hermetically sealed and antagonistic theological camps, which expend considerable energy trying to determine what is authentically African and what is not. The view advanced in this essay is that the issue of African theology is more than just definitional, and creating a few neat categories for academic consumption betrays the

²⁵ See J. N. K. Mugambi, *From Liberation to Reconstruction*, 2; "Problems and Promises of the Church in Africa," in Mugambi, *The Church and the Future of Africa*, 51; "The Role of the Churches in the Reconstruction of Africa: Recommendations," in Mugambi, *The Church and the Reconstruction of Africa*, 235, 244.

²⁶ See Kä Mana, *Théologie africaine pour temps de crise*, 33, 35.

²⁷ We might recall here David Tracy's three 'publics' of theological reflection, namely, the academy, the churches and society. *The Analogical Imagination* (London: SCM, 1981); see also David F. Ford, "Introduction to Modern Christian Theology," in Ford, *The Modern Theologians*, 12-14.

scope and extent of theological activity in Africa. Many theologians agree that a variety or plurality of theologies best fits the African situation: "African theology is situational. It follows that there will be no one theology that is valid for the whole of the continent: there will be a plurality of theologies, each rooted in the same sources of the Christian faith, but each addressing itself to a different context."²⁸ Reducing this plurality to a manageable few would tend to undermine the very basis for calling for theological variety in the first place. To return to that African proverb, more than two birds populate the skies of African theological reflection. While their flight paths may (and should) cross, it is counterproductive to restrict them to fixed trajectories or eliminate them on the basis of subjectively prefabricated criteria.

Thirdly, to overcome the impasse of compartmentalisation, it helps to ask a simple question: What sort of activity is theological reflection in Africa? What defines it as such? According to a simple but widely-held view African theology is "Christian theology as done by Africans."²⁹ Precisely, what do these Africans do when they do theology? The brief survey that I have undertaken above offers us several possibilities of finding answers to these questions. In answering them, I hope to show how the historico-critical approach of this essay fits, not merely into one or other of African theological schools, types or tendencies, but within the constitutive tasks and goals of African theological activity.

Theological activity in Africa appears as a quest for a constructive dialogue or engagement between the constitutive elements of Christian revelation and African experience, however one chooses to define this experience. So far, different approaches (African theology, Black theology, theology of reconstruction . . .) conceive of this engagement differently. For all of them, however, the crucial locus of this experience remains the point where the human meets the divine, or – to paraphrase Adrian Hastings – where Word meets World.³⁰ Several elements can shape the nature and meaning of this encounter and, therefore, generate a number of questions: Where and how does faith call the African to task? Where and how does the African put his or her faith to the test? In other words, what challenges "my faith as an African" in society and in the community called church?

Fourthly, flowing from the preceding point, theology represents the attempt to "unwrap," clarify and articulate in intelligible and concrete terms the meaning, complexity and promises of this Word-World encounter. We must concede, too, that the primary ground of this encounter or the ultimate condition for its existence remains the Word of God pronounced at the beginning of time (Genesis 1; John 1:1; 1 John 1:1), albeit constituting time itself and encountered in human history. In this sense, Mbiti and many other African theologians are right to argue forcefully in favour of the indispensability of the Scripture, the divine word in human language, as the basis or foundation of theological reflection. But neither the extreme biblicism of evangelical Christianity which

²⁸ John Parratt, "Conclusion: Current Issues in African Theology," in Parratt, *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, 142; see also, "Final Communiqué: Pan African Conference of Third World Theologians."

²⁹ John Parratt, "Introduction," in Parratt, *A Reader in African Christian Theology*, 2; de Gruchy, "African Theology: South Africa," 445-446; Mbiti, "The Biblical Basis for Present Trends in African Theology," 83; de Gruchy, "The Nature, Necessity and Task of Theology," 12; Setiloane, *African Theology*, 35-36. Another useful way of defining theology is how Africans talk about God. See Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, *Theology Brewed in an African Pot* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2008), 2-6.

³⁰ Adrian Hastings, *African Catholicism: Essays in Discovery*, 88.

eliminates all possibilities of dialogue (Byang Kato) nor the selective reading of the Scripture as a fixed repository of prefabricated theological categories (Kä Mana) would do justice to the meaning and mission of the Word. For as we read in John's Prologue, the Word is not a fixed, static reality; the Word embodies a divine dynamism that pulsates in Creation as God, life, light and flesh (1:1-14). The Word means something decisive for those who encounter it (John 1:12). The Word is extremely adaptable or – as Lamin Sanneh would argue – essentially “translatable.”³¹ Therefore, nothing of the African experience is strange to the Word. On the basis of this realisation, African theologians can approach the African experience of the Christian revelation from a variety of perspectives. In a number of ways they open up immense and varied domains of theological activity: Who is Jesus Christ for Africans? (Bénézet Bujo, Charles Nyamiti); What does it mean to be church in Africa today? (Elochukwu Uzukwu, Efoé-Julien Penoukou, J. N. K. Mugambi, Kä Mana); What promise(s) does the Christian faith bear for the poor and marginalised rural-dwelling Africans? (Jean-Marc Ela); What place do revelation and its current modes of transmission allow for affirming the personality, identity and dignity of the African woman? (Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Kanyoro Musimbi); What is the meaning of Christian faith in a context of oppression and injustice? (Alan Boesak, John de Gruchy, Charles Villa-Vicencio); What are the implications of faith for human actions in society? (Laurenti Magesa). . . .

Finally, in line with the central thesis of this essay, the foregoing demonstrates that on every patch of Africa's theological terrain, the primary concern ought not neglect the issue of context – the Word becoming flesh in concrete situations. Whether in African theology, Black theology or theology of reconstruction, the pivotal task is to take the African context seriously: “Detached from our human experience and context, theology comprehends little if anything at all of who we really are or what we are called to be as disciples of Jesus Christ.”³² In other words, theological activity focuses the light of the Gospel on what the Catholic Bishops of Africa designated as “*la vie de nos communautés*” (“the life of our communities”).³³ Various issues have affected and continue to affect this “life.” In this optic, the question that a theologian in Africa ought to ask is a simple one: What issues affect “the life of our Christian communities” in Africa today? These issues are important for the church and its theologies. Therefore, it would matter little whether or not one decides to designate this approach as African, Black or Reconstruction theology, as long as it shows compelling evidence of taking the life and context of African Christians seriously. Formulating responses to the issues and questions emerging from the African context should count as part of the “exhilarating business” of theological reflection.

Conclusion: To reiterate some of the points discussed in this essay so far, theological reflection in Africa involves the necessity of immersing oneself in multiple contexts and issues affecting the practice of the life of faith. Although, I argue for the approach of prioritising context, I do not wish to claim that this is the only valid

³¹ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1989).

³² *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, 152; see also, 7.

³³ *Déclaration des Evêques d'Afrique et de Madagascar (4e Synode épiscopal mondial - Rome 1974)*. See Tshibangu, *La théologie africaine*, 111.

one.³⁴ Rather, I simply attempt to show how such an approach might contribute towards a richer and more meaningful evaluation and re-evaluation of what it means to be the community called church in Africa today. Context may not be assumed superficially or solely on the basis of documentary evidence; it has to be demonstrated. While, as Tutu contends, “African theology [should] enthuse about the awesomeness of the transcendent . . . about the King, high and lifted up, whose train fills the temple,” it also retains the imperious task, as Setiloane correctly maintains, of taking “us to the roots of our problems in Africa.”³⁵ “The joyous song and the scintillating movement of Africa’s dance,” of which Tutu speaks, may be clearly perceptible in the church of Africa, but a variety of issues call to task the ground for its hope, joy and faith as a community (or communities) of believers. Addressing these issues demands of the theologian a genuine engagement in “*le devenir de sa société*” (“the decisive movement in time and space of society”).³⁶ As for the community called church itself, “the critical test” for its future “will be its relevance to the African situation.”³⁷ Between engaging in the social context of the community called church and testing the latter’s relevance to the African situation, theological activity stands to gain much by acquiring a better-refined method and a clearer and more credible articulation of its contribution to the faith and future of the universal ecclesial community.

³⁴ I have offered an elaborate account of the centrality of context in theological reflection in my “Method and Context: How and Where Theology Works in Africa,” in Darren C. Marks, (ed), *Shaping a Global Theological Mind* (Hampshire, England: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2008), 12-126.

³⁵ Tutu, “Whither African Theology?,” 369; Setiloane, *African Theology*, 31.

³⁶ Tshibangu, *La théologie africaine*, 83.

³⁷ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “The Church of the Future in Africa: Its Mission and Theology,” in Mugambi, *The Church and the Reconstruction of Africa*, 79.